

Hi, Cupcake!

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MELISSA ANDERSON SWEAZY



In between buying a \$3000 chair and finding the love of her life for Season Three, Carrie Bradshaw (a.k.a. Sarah Jessica Parker) took a bite out of a pink Magnolia Bakery cupcake and a revolution was born. After the episode aired, tourists by the busloads descended on the tiny bakery in Manhattan and practically overnight, adorably retro boutique bakeries sprang up like dandelions along the fashionable streets of NYC. The phenomenon went viral, cupcake bakeries spreading along the coasts then boomeranging toward the heartland, inspiring cookbooks, blogs and websites solely devoted to the dessert that got its name from the amount of flour required for the recipe. To those in the cupcake know, bakery names like Sprinkles, Vanilla Bakeshop and BakedNYC cause a collective swoon in those privileged to have sampled their delicacies.

Now *di rigueur* at weddings and baby showers, these deceptively petite sweets are not your grandmother's cupcakes; they are her recipe with an updated, catchy-name, organic-ingredient twist. More interestingly, they seem to be a bellweather for change. Cupcakes reversed the Krispy Kreme trend, declaring that small is the new big, that even in these economic hard times, you can indulge. A few yummy calories disguised as sprinkles and a flourish of buttercream are better than no calories at all. A cupcake boutique in your town is a sign that prosperity, fashion and the trendy stars have aligned to deliver to you sweet, sugary goodness.

So why didn't Memphis have any?



Sarah Moske wondered this as she and her husband spent their summer breaks sampling cupcakes along both coasts. The kind of natural in the kitchen who could whip up delectable baked goods with the proverbial blindfold, Moske found herself the latest victim of the cupcake craze with no outlet for her fix. She began making them in her Germantown home with friends and family lining up to be her taste-test guinea pigs. Her cupcakes were so successful that the famed cupcake blog (yes, there is such a thing), *All Things Cupcake*, requested an interview. But she's quick to reassure that her schedule isn't all frothy pink icing and sprinkles. A typical day finds her teaching kindergarten and grabbing a quick dinner with her husband before heading over to a neighboring church—the temporary home of Monkeybread Bakery. Tennessee home bakery licensing is a particularly stringent devil, so until she opens her dream storefront (ideally in midtown or downtown), Moske listens to oldies while whipping up spumoni and lemon-drop flavored wonders.

Krissy Johnson folds Madagascar vanilla into batter the color of cornsilk as she tells me she was the last person in the world to become a cupcake baker. She's making Cookies and Cream, one of her most popular flavors. The Average Joe is named after her father Joseph, a former Ringling Brothers clown who appears in clown makeup on their Sugarbowl Cupcakes website. In spite of her family's creative history, she claims she was not a naturally gifted baker. When she and her husband Tim devoured the cupcakes baked by a friend at their own wedding, she thought she would learn to make them as a surprise. The first several batches found their way into the trash; but determined, she eventually surprised herself by baking a batch that Tim happily devoured. Hooked, she began baking for friends, and Sugarbowl Cupcakes was born.

Above, clockwise from top left: Krissy Johnson mixes batter; the author's daughter, Harlow, reaches for a Sugarbowl cupcake; Tim Johnson shows off his baking T-shirt. Opposite: Muddy's Bakeshop cupcake.

For their anniversary, Tim took Krissy on a family trip to New York for a cupcake fact-finding mission. Fact—NYC cupcake bakers are surprisingly willing to share the secrets of their success. Fact—they are not so apt to share information when accidentally locked inside their bathroom by Tim’s brother. Inspired, the Johnsons returned home and delved into their market research—scouting potential storefronts, securing a license and preparing to open their first cupcake bakery. When plans for their location fell through at the very last minute, the setback was beyond frustrating; locally-sourced lighting fixtures along with tile samples for their dream bakery were wrapped and stored upstairs in their Collierville home. Undeterred, they work away the evening hours in their home bakery, singing along to the *Wicked* soundtrack while divvying up their tasks. (Tim makes the frosting and provides the moral support.) When I ask Tim if this is his dream as well, he is quick to tell me that he wants his wife “to be the boss.” He is a full-time sound engineer, working long and erratic hours on documentaries. But when he is home, he is the devoted sous-baker, melting the butter, assembling their custom cupcake stands and wearing his philosophy on the front of his t-shirt: “Real Men Eat Cupcakes.”

Kat Gordon is wearing a purple bouffant wig when I meet her. It was that or the Mohawk, and since she wore the Carol Brady the day before, she’s wary of the power of the fake

hair. “All day yesterday I suddenly felt the need to accessorize,” she explains of her Brady-ness. The wigs have a purpose beyond amusing herself and her devoted customers. When she opened Muddy’s Bakeshop in February of 2008, she braced herself for what the business books warned her would be the slow struggle of luring customers. Wig firmly on head, Kat found herself routinely baking for seventy-two hours straight, her parents and brothers pitching in to help ease the insane demand. She arrived here in a roundabout way, daydreaming about opening a store while following her mother’s successful foray into real estate. She’s the first to admit she was awful at it and quick to acknowledge the universe helping her along the way when she began a catering business on the side.

The bakery is a home away from home, not just for Kat and her boyfriend, Thomas, and various employee-family members, but for the mothers with toddlers and kids after school and anyone with a sweet tooth and taste for genial customer service. During the course of our interview, customers greet Kat by name as she sits sipping coffee from one of the vintage mugs that hang on pegs in the coffee section. Throughout the bakery there are wall-length stretches for children to scribble away their thanks. In back, there is a gratitude tree painted on the back wall of her shop; the sanctioned graffiti out-blurbs any glowing review her bakery could receive. Muddy’s recently began a lunch service and, ever ambitious, Kat dreams of offering field trips to



Above and left: Harlow digs in and rearranges the frosting. Opposite: The prozac cupcake from Muddy’s Bakeshop.



the farm where they collect their eggs. But as long as she keeps up her supply of Prozac (chocolate on chocolate cupcakes) and her black and white Capotes, Muddy's will continue to see the devoted beating a path to her door. With her collection of wigs, the only question is which Kat will be on hand to greet them?

Fortunately for Memphis, we have a different conundrum: Which cupcake purveyor will we be patronizing today? *eM*

Melissa Anderson Sweazy likes almond extract, baker's dozens, couscous, dark chocolate, easy recipes, falafel, ganache, ham palachintas, Indian food, Japanese food, kiwi, lamb chops, macarons, naan, onion bhajis, papadum, Q (the BB kind), risotto, sweet potato fries, tamales, Uncle Mark's smoked bologna, volvic, watercress soup, xtra helpings, yerba mate, and zabaglione with berries. She is also teaching her daughter the ABCs.



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